

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Office of Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Governor DeSantis:

We write to request, urgently, that you immediately take all possible steps, together with the state and federal governments, to, first and foremost, procure a field hospital in Immokalee to address the COVID-19 pandemic, and also to conduct aggressive, proactive COVID-19 testing and distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), including sufficient quantities of sanitizer, in Immokalee. Unless this is done, Immokalee will almost certainly become an epicenter of contagion, with dire consequences not only for the farmworker community in Immokalee and the broader Southwest Florida area, but also the Florida agricultural industry and the food supply of the entire United States.

There is no sugar-coating the facts: Immokalee is uniquely vulnerable due to a combination of critical factors, including: 1) overcrowded housing and transportation conditions; 2) the designation of agriculture as an essential industry during this pandemic; and 3) a near total lack of access to medical care and resources even before COVID-19.

Overcrowded Housing and Transportation. Overcrowding is endemic in and around Immokalee, both at home and at work. As documented in the Collier County Needs Assessment for 2016-2020, “[h]ousing stock in Immokalee is not sufficient to meet the needs of the existing workforce,” but rather consists in large part of mobile homes that are “often run down and overpopulated.”¹ And while grower-provided farmworker housing is generally compliant with the legally mandated 50 square feet per worker, that too is totally inadequate to meet the demands for social separation and quarantine once COVID-19 takes root. The County’s assessment therefore understates the reality on the ground, with farmworkers often living 10-12 persons to a single-wide trailer or 4-6 in single-room bunkhouses. Residents are, therefore, much more likely to contract COVID-19 since social distancing and self-quarantine are simply not possible for most farmworkers.

We cannot emphasize that latter fact enough: *There are no rooms in the vast majority of farmworker homes in Immokalee where people who have tested positive can self-isolate.* Once one occupant is infected, there is simply nothing to stop the spread of the virus to his or her housemates.

Furthermore, the nature of farm labor, which as you know is the most common occupation of those living in or near Immokalee, also forces farmworkers into extremely close quarters in

¹ <https://www.colliercountyfl.gov/Home/ShowDocument?id=66403>

which the novel coronavirus will undoubtedly spread quickly. Most farmworkers lack their own transportation, and have no choice but to ride fully-loaded busses and vans to and from work each day.

Agriculture as Essential Industry. As of March 19, the federal government has officially declared farmworkers to be part of the “critical infrastructure workforce” with a “special responsibility to maintain [a] normal work schedule.”² Accordingly, farmworkers will almost certainly be exempt from any government action in Florida to stem the spread of disease by sheltering-in-place, just as they have been in California.³

Access to Care. Most Immokalee residents are too poor to own a car, and public transportation is virtually nonexistent. Thus, anyone in or around Immokalee who becomes sick with COVID-19 will find it extremely difficult to procure care elsewhere in the County.

This brings us to the crux of the matter: *Immokalee lacks a hospital, and there are no medical facilities and virtually no medical personnel in Immokalee today.* And so those in Immokalee – lacking access to transportation, but uniquely susceptible to spreading infection – will be the last to obtain treatment, with grave consequences not only for themselves and their families, but also our entire region, state, and country when (not if) the disease spreads far and wide as a result.

It must also be stated, however uncomfortable it is to confront, that we have every reason to believe that even when Immokalee residents do seek care elsewhere in the County, they will be less likely to receive effective treatment there. This is due to a variety of factors beyond control, including but not limited to limited English proficiency, lack of health insurance, lower medical literacy among low-income individuals, and the fact that Collier County will already be struggling to meet the needs of its many senior citizens who themselves are highly vulnerable to COVID-19. If history is any guide, the rationing of critical medical care and resources in Naples will not favor farmworkers from Immokalee.

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Following Hurricane Irma, Immokalee was the last town in Florida to have its electricity restored. While disparities of this nature may be tolerated in Florida in the wake of a hurricane, ignoring the people of Immokalee during the current pandemic cannot be, because it will harm everyone by causing a spike in contagion that might well be unprecedented.

We are, in fact, all connected, and we ignore that truth now at our peril. When an infected farmworker shops at a supermarket or elsewhere in Naples, everyone at that store is at risk, no matter how they got there, and so is everyone else that person contacts subsequently. The only way to break the cycle of infection now, before it is out of control, is by placing a field hospital in Immokalee immediately, where the farmworker community can easily and quickly access effective care and, critically, practice self-isolation that is impossible at home.

² <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>

³ <https://www.thecalifornian.com/story/news/2020/03/18/advocates-fear-california-ag-workers-exempt-shelter-place/5074580002/>

Respectfully,



Lucas Benitez
Co-founder
Coalition of Immokalee Workers



Greg Asbed
Co-founder
Coalition of Immokalee Workers



Judge Laura Safer Espinoza
Executive Director
Fair Food Standards Council

CC: Representative Mario Diaz-Balart
Representative Byron Donalds
Representative Heather Fitzenhagen
Commissioner Nikki Fried (Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services)
Mr. Jason Mahon (Florida Division of Emergency Management)
Director Jared Moskowitz (Florida Division of Emergency Management)
Senator Kathleen Passidomo
Dr. Scott Rivkees
Representative Ana Maria Rodriguez
Representative Bob Rommel
Representative Francis Rooney
Senator Marco Rubio
Senator Rick Scott
Ms. Stephanie Vick (Florida Department of Health in Collier County)